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INHIBITIONS, HABITS, AND THE STUDENT'S RIGHT OF WAY¹

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It must be true that teachers everywhere desire their students to use excellent diction, to produce good pieces of writing, unified, coherent, well emphasized, abounding in grace and ease of expression. To produce such satisfactory results requires the most delicate adjustment of the teacher to the students, to the theory of composition, to the practice of it, to the teaching of it. That happy, though difficult, adjustment the successful teacher, wise in his attitudes and awake to the experiences of life, discovers and makes. The unsuccessful teacher, just as eager in his work, holding equally high and worthy ambitions, teaching much in the same manner, is unable to discover and put into practice the profitable attitudes. Seldom is the difference between the two the result of great matters—like superior training. Most often the slightest shift in the unsuccessful teacher's attitude, the slightest shift in his approach to material, to the student, and to the problem of teaching, will place him over the line that has marked him off from success.

Several respects in which even the best-intentioned teachers may fail in attitude I wish to consider with you. When these attitudes have crystallized into habits they become what I term (1) the diction bogey, (2) the finished-product idea, (3) the worship of the magical *cue*, (4) the theme obsession, (5) teacher hypnosis. A word about each.

1. *The diction bogey*.—This is the advice to hunt down the right word. It is good advice, but it ought not to be pushed too hard. When we have pushed it too hard we judge that it has become a bogey for the student by the frequency with which we hear the

¹ From an address before the National Council of Teachers of English, Portland, Oregon, July 12, 1917.

remark, "I have trouble with my diction." Doubtless; but it is usually manufactured trouble. If the hunt for the exact word injures more through hampering fulness of thought (and it usually does) than it benefits through the landing of a right word or two, then obviously we are pushing the doctrine too hard. Think of a young mind at tussle with an idea, and then think of the inhibiting effect of the doctrine ringing through his consciousness, "There is one really right word; get it." Nothing can come to that mind but a halt. Really, seeking the exact word helps young students very little to increase their vocabularies and very little in exactness of thought.

The diction bogey shows itself again in unwise handling of the "good use" doctrine. "Be careful of your diction; use only words that are national, present, or reputable." Literary men, any men with mature minds, might make good use of this doctrine, though it is really rather pedantic and rather impractical; but young minds, rapidly growing minds, find it pretty largely humbug. For them it means nothing honest. It most abundantly produces self-deception. Can one pupil in a hundred know what words are in good use? What means have they for knowing? Do you, teacher, know? Do you know anything really helpful in writing, about good use? And if your students could know, would it not be both pedantic and soul-narrowing for them to use only such words as their consciences recognized as present, national, and reputable? Surely this, like the previous doctrine, is for settled minds. Like the other, it operates *after* one has done his thinking. Young people think, and rightly, as they strive for expression; and it is of slight value, often of positive injury, to command them to do their thinking before beginning to write or speak.

Certainly two habits result whenever the diction bogey rears its head: the habit of using words profusely rather than of caring for ideas, and the habit of resorting to the use of general words and phraseology. The former is a direct result that needs no comment; the latter, an indirect result, needs comment. It usually is the outcome of the despair which is itself the outcome of prolonged search for the exact and national and reputable and present word. For the young mind suspicion grows around all words. Those that

are to it most alive are tabooed, and those that seem to it dead and buried deep in dictionaries and Macaulays receive the teacher's stamp of approval. The pupil comes to distrust his own, his family's, and his friends' vocabularies, as well as the vocabularies of most of the printed matter he and they read. His distrust influences his writing (and seldom for the better), but almost never his speech.

The student has two rights to be recognized and revered. There is first his right to think of and feel the thing itself rather than diction—the thing, or person, or scene, or situation, or thought; and, thinking of it, to be vigorous and sincere in expression even if occasionally crude, even if his words are colloquial, or slangy, or of his own coinage. Do not put inhibiting advice before him. Get him to crave expression. Get him to express himself in language alive for him. Once craving expression, he will improve his diction to keep pace with his growing powers of thought. No teacher has the right to poke the diction bogey into the youth's consciousness. Certainly a teacher must help every student to improve his language; but every teacher should beware of offering advice helpful only to mature minds. Secondly, he has the right to express *himself*, to make himself known through his expression. Too often through his expression he makes known pedantry and priggishness, or his teacher's hobbies, or dull exactness. If your teaching of diction is good you should be able to state of almost any theme which one of your pupils wrote it; and every reader should be able to tell in general the type of boy or girl behind the expression. Can you? Could any reader? Or might a reader say, This is the product of unknown quantities, x 's and y 's? Ask of every theme, Who is behind the pen? and, What is behind the pen?

The handling of diction demands the most skilful adjustment of teacher to theory and to pupil.

2. *The finished-product idea.*—This is the phrase that betrays the condition: "I don't want to write arguments; I can't. I want to write descriptions; I do them best." Yes, yes, pupils soon learn to insist on writing what they are "best at"—meaning, of course, the type of expression that has heretofore brought them their

highest grades. Why is a pupil unwilling to experiment with an essay? Why, because the teacher may not (or will not) think his effort to do something he is not "good at" worth as much as the production of something he is "good at," and he would therefore be in danger of failing. Whenever that is the fact, surely the teacher has failed to take the profitable attitude through a mistaken sense of evaluation. Most of the students who come to me prefer not to submit a theme rather than to submit one that is considered unfinished; though by a finished theme they mean, as far as I can discover, one from which all the life has been extracted, that "reads smoothly," that has "proper" diction, that sticks to the obvious, the generally accepted. Such a conception of the need of finish lies behind the pathetic experience of pupil after pupil who attacks subject after subject only to throw away each effort in turn because he "cannot think of anything more to say." What progress both teacher and pupil might make under a prevailing conception that even one of these unfinished efforts, if sincere, is worth more than the average "finished-off" theme! What opportunities for helpfulness would open up to the teacher! What advantageous starting-off ground there would be!

Every pupil has the right to *experiment*. Every theme he submits should be, not a crowned success, but a genuine attempt to say something. The product may appear to a grown-up person grotesque, though logical and even eloquent to a fellow-pupil. It may be, probably will be, incoherent, not unified, and poorly emphasized. Yet the teacher should accept each genuine attempt, whether in finished form or not, and work with the pupil from that. It does not do to discourage enthusiasm and vigor; there is not enough of either in the world. And discouragement means retardation of development always. I often think that teachers should persistently remember that over failures as well as successes one climbs higher.

Again, every pupil has the right to express *himself*. If he cannot do it on an assigned subject he should do it on one of his own choosing in a similar line of effort. Impatience with a boy's or girl's interests and expression thereof, because the teacher never had those interests or has outgrown them, is a sin against personality.

If the boy's adventure story is full of wild improbability, *point out* the improbability, but *correct* the expression and *criticize* the structure; insist on intelligible expression, but not on probability. Remember that it is natural for youth to overstate, and that if it is curbed too soon later expression will be flaccid and tame. Trust the years. Neither is it such a sin for youth to try to set governments or even the universe aright. Many an ambitious young man has imaginatively created the world anew and profited hugely thereby. Accept what the youth has; encourage him to grow. Why should he not handle big questions of public policy? Train him to discover why. Encourage him to learn. Don't offer as a substitute "How to Make a Fireless Cooker."

Lastly, this finished-product idea throws all the emphasis on *how* and none on *what*. A pupil will ask of his theme, Are the sentences proper? Words proper, spelling and commas all right? Does it read smoothly? But seldom will he ask of the content anything but, Is it well outlined?

No, the emphasis should not be on finish primarily. Teachers who lead pupils to feel eagerness to experiment under guidance are the most successful. An unfinished theme virile in thought and expression, presenting a youth's genuine reaction, is worth everything to him and to his teacher. It is something to work on, a basis for understanding between the two.

3. *The worship of the magical cue*.—"My themes are coherent and unified, aren't they? I write them all according to an outline." Pupils become stupefied by the endless repetition of the words coherence, unity, emphasis. After the first innocent efforts to grasp their significance novices come quickly to believe that virtue resides in the words. Therefore, with minds as dull as if in mesmeric trance, they chant the holy phrase—and become saved! To the average college Freshman unity signifies oneness (whatever that means) and coherence stick-togetherness (a popcorn ball is a good figure to keep in mind), and emphasis placing the important word or sentence or paragraph at the beginnings or ends of sentences, paragraphs, themes, and book reviews. And the application of these three principles has become rote mechanism.

Do teachers themselves know only the unity and coherence of the logic of science? In what writers, of standing or of no standing, do they find such strictness as they demand? In Huxley? Possibly. In Lamb, Emerson, Carlyle, Hawthorne? Do we not know that there are many degrees of unity, coherence, and emphasis? Are there no principles of artistic coherence, unity, emphasis that differ in kind from those of logic and of science? In my whole experience I have heard just one teacher (not myself) give any indication that there is any such thing as artistic unity. And how many recognize the unfathomable logic of experience itself and gladly accept record of it in themes? Are we not insisting that pupils order existence before they have acquired any principle on which to order it?

Overplanning is a bad habit resulting from unintelligent use of these principles. Seldom do pupils dare to submit to teachers their real experience with a book, a person, a thing, a situation. If the plan was not in the experience it must be imported at whatever cost. Most high-school graduates can develop outlines adamant in construction. Most of them cannot use those same outlines. Outlining as generally practiced is a positive injury to observation and deductions therefrom; is a subtle, irresistible temptation to theorize; leads to misinterpretation of life-experience; encourages lies about one's adventures with things, and situations, and books, and men. Do teachers realize that outlining need mean neither grasp of subject nor understanding of the *cue* of composition?

The satisfaction that comes to a pupil once his outline is completed is another bad result. The task is then done; thinking can cease. If the outline is unified and coherent (the principle of emphasis and proportion receives little consideration), then the theme based on it must be. And that theme must be a good one.

Every pupil has the right to record his observations and his thoughts squirming with life, slippery as eels; and no teacher has the right to cue him into deadness—even in the interests of rhetoric! The composition class is a laboratory. To a laboratory is brought material to work with, and not the prepared slide only. Let the

boy bring in his lively experience, humor and all. Let him record his observations and thoughts, inaccurate and egotistical as may be, as they come to him. Then mold the material. Help him the next time to bring his material more nearly ready for use. But do not let life escape!

4. *The theme obsession.*—"Why, you really don't think that the composition we learn in your course is worth anything in history or science?"—there's the telltale phrase. Probably because of the composition teacher's demand for mechanical perfection (and no less), for completeness of thought (and no less), for "one thought well and coherently expressed" (and no less), for certain types of writing (of pure nature—exposition, etc.—only), and because of the same teacher's acceptance of themes that fall far short of these ideals, the pupil comes finally to believe a theme a kind of writing unto itself like nothing on the earth and, he hopes, under or over it. Most of his sterility of thought (what young person was ever really sterile!) and baldness of expression, keenly realized by himself as well as by his teacher, root in some such idea.

The resulting bad habits are familiar: "Why be interesting? It isn't necessary, provided you produce a theme." "It'll get by if it is correct." "It's not worth reading, anyhow; teacher wouldn't read it if she didn't have to." These are the truth, the last a bitter truth. Furthermore, persistent measuring of his work against classics leads to the hopeless attitude: "I can't ever write like that guy can, anyway."

First, every pupil has the right to know what a theme really is—an effort (not a finished result) to express one's self genuinely (whatever that may mean—it must be interpreted by each individual). Secondly, he has the right to match his efforts against another's and not be judged by a teacher's desires, rules, or judgment (exclusively), nor by the work of literary masters, but by the approval and work of his mates. And his age and state of mind and body should never be forgotten. Thirdly, he has the right to know that he has something to say about anything and everything. It is the teacher's business to awaken him to that fact if he is asleep to it; and if he is awake to it, to guide him into fuller and ever finer powers of expression. And no teacher who

knows and cares for boys and girls can possibly give the idea that a theme's a theme for a' that.

5. *Teacher hypnosis*.—This is the phrase that betrays the condition: "As soon as I know what you want I will do better work." That is a genuine expression of willingness to co-operate. But if co-operation is accepted on such a basis it rapidly becomes domination of one by the other—command and obedience. In such a sense the teacher has no right to *want* anything. Is the end in view in the study of composition satisfaction of the teacher? Many pupils firmly believe so. Writing themes is for them the gay (or gray) problem of writing what the teacher wants, when, and how. It is safe to avoid in assignments the phrase "I want you to."

The pupil has the right not to be graduated a dullard. And all pupils in teacher-tow are on the way to dullarddom. However strong his will, four years of such leading is likely to break it. I myself rejoice in a Freshman who shows himself a stubborn creature. My hope is that he is out of teacher-tow. To break the towline I say over and over to my Freshmen, patiently or impatiently, but always emphatically, "*I don't want anything. You it is who want.*" If you do not want something as a product, you will make no progress in ability to express your thoughts and feelings."

As an aside one might notice that the teacher has fallen into such willingness to degrade pupils largely through discipleship to the *dean* of composition—description, exposition, argumentation, narration. Such a demarcation in writing, over-recommended in textbooks and over-worshiped by teachers, is artificial. Created for convenience, it has lately grown into mastery.

The pupil also has the right of self-development. Teacher and parent out of the way, he will almost develop by himself. He *will* try to express himself. Teachers who despair of getting him to do so are not in touch with the pupil, themselves, teaching, or life. In the realm of composition work there is no falser assumption than that the pupil cannot express himself (*himself*, mind you) until he has something to express. He always has something to express! It is a libel to assume that he has not; and libel to maintain, even after repeated and seemingly futile effort to discover something for him, that he has not. I confess myself guilty at one period of my

teaching of such libel; but now years of association with young people tell me that what I meant by such an assertion, as all teachers holding to it do mean, was, The pupil cannot learn to write until he thinks as I think, about such subjects as I, given free rein, would select, and with such results as I might obtain. We refuse to accept what he has to say—his genuine reaction to a book, person, action, situation, thing, or what not; we refuse to accept that and demand some other, some assumed reaction. And we refuse because what he has to say is not grown-up, final, complete, mature—not improperly and impossibly mature; or because it is violent, crass, too mild or too cocksure or too smug, too unthoughtful (using our standard of thoughtfulness); or because there is something either not perfect or not to our taste. Believe me, every single pupil under our instruction has something to say about everything and anything. If he will not say it, it is because we have frightened him out of doing so. Our problem lies in getting it out, and our success lies in *building on what is there*. When a pupil thinks our thoughts or feels our feelings he is either a precocious youth indeed, a prig, or a hypocrite—certainly he is abnormal. Should a pupil be required to walk all the distance to meet the teacher?

The problem of composition is the problem of all education: Given a boy or girl, how help to develop the inherent qualities of that boy or girl? Notice, *that* boy or girl, and not a fictitious type of boy or girl. Simple understanding of human nature with the addition of simple psychology and knowledge of rhetoric and composition will put any teacher in position to help any youth. And any youth will respond.

The difference between a successful teacher and an unsuccessful teacher is slight. Happily, throughout our schools from coast to coast, teachers are seeing these yawning pitfalls I have enumerated and are drawing back. Every day teachers are catching sight of the slight changes they must make in their instruction, and are acting. Shibboleths fall away, and unprofitable, trouble-breeding attitudes become changed.